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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 002120

SIPDIS

FOR SA/INS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11-12-12

TAGS: PHUM PREL CE LTTE

SUBJECT: Controversial journalist's visa extension denied amidst speculation of LTTE and/or political influence

Refs: (A) Reston VA dtg 110418Z NOV 02

- (B) Reston VA dtg 110356Z NOV 02

(U) Classified by Ambassador E. Ashley Wills. Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (U) SUMMARY: GSL recently denied a visa extension for Paul Harris, a UK national and a journalist loosely affiliated with the "Daily Telegraph" in London. The British High Commission doubts that Harris will return except perhaps to finalize some personal financial matters. Speculation in the press is that the denial was based on political pressure because of Harris' criticism of the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The President's office has alleged that the visa denial amounts to suppression of freedom of the press. END SUMMARY.

Harris out, the President pounces

2. (U) The visa case of Paul Harris, a UK national and controversial journalist in Sri Lanka who is loosely affiliated with the "Daily Telegraph" in London (and writes for local publications), has created a minor furor in the Sri Lankan press. On November 8 Harris' visa to Sri Lanka expired. Prior to the expiration of the visa Harris had applied for an extension, which was denied by the MFA. Harris departed Sri Lanka to the Maldives on November 8, with the stated intention of reapplying for a visa.

3. (C) The President's office issued a statement on November 6 accusing the government of preventing freedom of the press. In part, it stated, "Freedom of expression and the right of dissent are bedrock requirements for a democratic and free society and this insidious silencing of an often lone voice against the conventional wisdom of the government is a serious erosion of media freedom and (a) set back for democracy in Sri Lanka." The statement received widespread coverage in the weekend press. Presidential spokesman Harim Peiris added that although Harris may have technically broken the terms of his visa the decision to enforce the rules on him was arbitrary. Peiris averred that one way the President may make her point that she supports freedom of the press and show she is in control is to grant Harris Sri Lankan citizenship. Peiris emphasized that no such decision has yet been made.

MFA holds firm

4. (SBU) Responding to media coverage that was critical of the MFA's decision to deny a visa extension for Harris, the MFA released a statement explaining its decision. The MFA charged Harris with violating the terms of his original visa, saying it prohibited him from engaging in any work other than as a journalist for the "Daily Telegraph." The statement specifically commented on Harris' writing regular columns for the "Daily Mirror," a local English language daily that has expressed some criticism of the government and the current peace process. (NOTE: Harris' columns have been openly critical of the direction of Sri Lanka's peace process. Among other things, Harris wrote that his predictions that the LTTE would use the ceasefire to prepare for future conflict, particularly through recruitment of children, have come true. He also wrote that the government is not doing enough to counter or to even address this development. END NOTE.)

5. (C) Deputy British High Commissioner Peter Hughes, commented that late last week he had urged Harris to abide by Sri Lanka's laws and not overstay his visa. Hughes does not believe the GSL will revisit the decision to deny the visa extension. Hughes stated that he spoke to Foreign Secretary Nihal Rodrigo about the issue and Rodrigo indicated that the decision not to

extend the visa had been made at the "highest level" and there was no intention to review the issue. Hughes added that the MFA believes that the worst of the negative publicity about the denial passed over the weekend. Hughes forewarned that Harris is only scheduled to stay in the Maldives until November 14, when he may try to stir up attention again. Hughes closed by saying Rodrigo had intimated that the GSL was willing to work out a deal for Harris to return to Sri Lanka so that he can finalize his personal financial arrangements, but then only for a week.

Media organizations object

16. (SBU) Multiple organizations associated with freedom of the press have expressed their dissatisfaction with the actions of the GSL on this matter. The Editor's Guild of Sri Lanka, the Free Media Movement (a local NGO), and the Foreign Correspondents Association of Sri Lanka have criticized the decision not to extend Harris' visa as an infringement on freedom of the press. In addition to accusations that the government is trying to get rid of a critic, some articles claim that the LTTE is applying pressure on the GSL to silence Harris because of his criticism of the LTTE and the peace process in general.

Comment

17. (C) The GSL clearly wants Harris out, and it may well be for what he has written about the peace process rather than for violating the terms of his visa. The President saw his case as a chance to attack the Prime Minister and his government over the same kind of heavy-handed tactics he has accused her of in the past. In doing so, she may have scored a few points. Still, the Prime Minister's conduct since his December 2001 election has earned him a reputation for honesty and moderation, and the Sri Lankan public seems willing to give him the benefit of the doubt on Harris. Mission will watch closely to determine if this case is an isolated incident or the beginning of a trend toward suppression of the press by the GSL.

WILLS